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SUBJECT: Avian Flu in Nigeria: The Long Haul

¶11. (SBU) Summary: Despite a substantial effort to respond to the Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak in Nigeria by the GON and international partners, the epidemic clearly has not been brought under control. Given the weak human- and animal-health infrastructures, and the complicated issues of federal-state coordination and resources, even with the best will in the world, the AI situation will remain a serious problem for the foreseeable future. Recognizing that efforts to halt the spread in birds have been unsuccessful to date, there is an urgent need to limit human exposure and improve human surveillance. The Mission will consult with other partners to develop and support recommendations to the GON for the most effective strategy, given the limitations in Nigeria. End Summary.

Still Not a Pretty Picture

¶12. (SBU) A month after Avian Influenza (AI) was confirmed in Nigeria, it is clear that the battle against AI is going to be a long, hard slog. One UN Food and Agriculture Organization official has predicted it would take three years to come to grips with AI in Nigeria. The plans currently implemented in Nigeria provide for a response considerably after the fact in AI-affected areas. The plans do not make any real attempt to catch and quickly halt the spread of outbreaks in new areas. Much of the response so far has focused on commercial or semi-commercial operations, and has not yet tried come to grips with backyard flocks. Yet culling backyard flocks may be the key to controlling the spread of the virus and limiting human exposure.

¶13. (SBU) Even in Kaduna, which has been acknowledged to have the most effective response, Western news agencies reported that when they visited villages near Sambawa Farm, where the first outbreak was confirmed, chickens were dying, but no official had visited the affected villages, and villagers had no information on what to do. Local press has reported that dead chickens have been dumped at a number of sites, and attempts to contact the state avian flu response unit regarding this were unsuccessful. The USAID-designed and -funded pilot culling program will be expanded to include Katsina and Kaduna as well as Kano, at the GON's request.

¶14. (SBU) Surveillance remains weak and testing is slow. Despite early reports of possible outbreaks in Jigawa State, it is still officially AI-free, though outbreaks have been confirmed in all surrounding territories. There are a number of states with reports of suspected outbreaks and/or samples sent for which there is no final determination. The most recent report is of 1,000 dead chickens and ducks dumped in Yola, the capital of Adamawa State in the Northeast. Cameroon on March 12 became the fourth country in Africa to report an outbreak of AI, after the virus was found in poultry in Far North Province, which borders Nigeria. Tests at the Pasteur Institute in Paris showed this outbreak was H5N1. The outbreak in Cameroon suggests that the virus is probably present in Adamawa and Borno States. Little information is being made available about the extent of outbreaks in affected states.

¶15. (SBU) Meanwhile, the outbreak officially reached the southern half of Nigeria, as H5N1 was confirmed in Benue, Anambra, Rivers, and Ogun States. The latter three are not contiguous to other infected areas. In some cases the outbreaks were found in urban districts, so there is a strong chance the disease was imported in live poultry coming from the North to urban markets. In other cases the virus may be present but as yet undetected in intervening areas.

¶16. (SBU) On possible human cases, we just don't know. Western press reports from the field indicate that many potentially exposed people are fearful of authority, and of possible quarantine or worse. In an effort to get a clearer picture, the Centers for Disease Control is carrying out two human-surveillance activities to try to get a better sense

of the level of possible human exposure.

¶ 7. (SBU) The GON plans to pay compensation in Katsina, Bauchi, and Nasarawa States -- although the compensation program for now does not apply to small backyard poultry farmers. The compensation as currently designed and implemented does little to either encourage AI reporting, facilitate culling, or to provide relief to industry or householders.

¶ 8. (SBU) Comment: Despite its clear shortcomings, the Nigerian response has been a substantial effort. The unpalatable truth is that GON probably has responded about as well as it is able to, given the weakness in its human-and animal-health infrastructure. Even given sufficient political will, Nigeria is unlikely to be able to control or limit the impact and spread of AI in Nigeria or to its neighbors. Given this, the major challenge is how to limit human exposure and create human-surveillance capacity. An early step would be to better link human surveillance with animal surveillance and culling efforts. There is a serious lack of resources reaching the state level in Nigeria. USAID therefore is increasingly working directly with the states. The mission also will consult with international organizations and donor agencies on how to better direct anti-AI resources to Nigeria's states, where they are needed most.

¶ 9. (SBU) A second challenge will be managing the economic impact. The AI epidemic has reached the stage that the country's poultry industry could remain under semi-permanent threat. This threat could be great enough to affect many Nigerians who rely on chicken and eggs as important protein supplements.

¶ 10. (SBU) Comment continued: If Nigeria's response has been ineffective, it likely is among the most effective in West Africa. Other states may look to Nigeria, through ECOWAS and otherwise, for support in battling AI, and Nigeria may try to be responsive. Any response, however, is likely to be at the expense of the already overburdened effort in Nigeria. From our perspective, it appears that just as Nigeria will not be able to control or limit AI, neither will its neighbors. Even if Nigeria or another country could do so, any success would be likely to be undermined by a weak response in neighboring countries.

¶ 11. (SBU) Comment continued: Mission proposes to consult closely with other donors to assess the most effective course of action given the ground realities and limitations in Nigeria. We will then seek to provide some concrete recommendations to the GON on how to proceed and to orient our assistance to support those recommendations. Among other things, we will look at supporting increased capacity at the UN organizations dealing with AI.
CAMPBELL